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Universal Basic Income from the 'Buen Vivir' Decolonial Perspective

Abstract: This article interrogates the relationship between Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a policy tool and Buen Vivir as a conceptual framework, interpreting their significance within the domains of sustainable development and socio-environmental justice. Through a critical examination of conventional development paradigms from a decolonial perspective, we identify a substantial lacuna in the extant literature: the imperative to incorporate epistemologies from the Global South into social policy formulation. Employing non-systematic literature review methodologies, we reflect on how Buen Vivir principles might inform UBI implementations. Our reflections emphasise the necessity of reconceptualising social policies through a lens that not only critiques prevailing economic structures but also valorises and recuperates indigenous and local knowledge systems. Our central objective is to propose the notion of decolonizing Universal Basic Income (UBI), understood as the process of reimagining UBI through Southern epistemologies that challenge Eurocentric assumptions about well-being, development, and human-nature relationships. In doing so, it aims to contribute to scholarship on social and environmental development within the context of post-development thought.

Keywords: Universal Basic Income, Buen Vivir, Decoloniality, Sumak Kawsay, Social Policy, Epistemologies of the South

Resumen: Este artículo analiza la relación entre la Renta Básica Universal (RBU) como herramienta de política pública y el Buen Vivir como marco conceptual, reflexionando sobre su importancia en los ámbitos del desarrollo sostenible y la justicia socioambiental. A través de un examen crítico de los paradigmas convencionales de desarrollo desde una perspectiva decolonial,

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identificamos una importante laguna en la literatura existente: la necesidad imperiosa de incorporar las epistemologías del Sur Global en la formulación de políticas sociales. Empleando metodologías de revisión no sistemática de la literatura, reflexionamos sobre cómo los principios del Buen Vivir podrían orientar la implementación de la RBU. Enfatizamos la necesidad de reconceptualizar las políticas sociales no solo desde una crítica a las estructuras económicas dominantes, sino también revalorizando y recuperando los sistemas de conocimiento indígenas y locales. Nuestro objetivo central es proponer la noción de descolonizar la Renta Básica Universal (RBU), entendida como el proceso de reimaginar la RBU a través de epistemologías del Sur que desafían los supuestos eurocéntricos sobre el bienestar, el desarrollo y las relaciones entre humanos y naturaleza. Así, pretendemos contribuir al estudio del desarrollo social y ambiental en el contexto del pensamiento posdesarrollista.

Palabras clave: Renta Básica Universal, Buen Vivir, Decolonialidad, Sumak Kawsay, Política Social, Epistemologías del Sur

Resumo: Este artigo analisa a relação entre a Renda Básica Universal (RBU) como ferramenta de política pública e o Bem Viver como marco conceitual, refletindo sobre sua importância nos âmbitos do desenvolvimento sustentável e da justiça socioambiental. Por meio de um exame crítico dos paradigmas convencionais de desenvolvimento desde uma perspectiva decolonial, identificamos uma lacuna importante na literatura existente: a necessidade imperiosa de incorporar as epistemologias do Sul Global na formulação de políticas sociais. Utilizando metodologias de revisão não sistemática da literatura, refletimos sobre como os princípios do Bem Viver poderiam orientar a implementação da RBU. Enfatizamos a necessidade de reconceituar as políticas sociais não apenas a partir de uma crítica às estruturas econômicas dominantes, mas também valorizando e recuperando os sistemas de conhecimento indígenas e locais. Nosso objetivo central é propor a noção de descolonizar a Renda Básica Universal (RBU), entendida como o processo de reimaginar a RBU por meio de epistemologias do Sul que desafiem os pressupostos eurocêntricos sobre bem-estar, desenvolvimento e as relações entre humanos e natureza. Assim, pretendemos contribuir para o estudo do desenvolvimento social e ambiental no contexto do pensamento pós-desenvolvimentista.

Palavras-chave: Renda Básica Universal, Bem Viver, Decolonialidade, Sumak Kawsay, Política Social, Epistemologias do Sul

Introduction

This research interrogates the relationship between Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a policy tool and Buen Vivir as a conceptual framework, interpreting their significance within the domains of sustainable development and socio-environmental justice. Our central argument is not merely that UBI and Buen Vivir share certain similarities, but rather that UBI as a policy mechanism can be reimagined and implemented in ways that specifically advance the broader agenda of Buen Vivir. We propose the notion of decolonizing Universal Basic Income, understood as the process of reimagining UBI through Southern epistemologies that challenge Eurocentric assumptions about well-being, development, and human-nature relationships.

This research is situated within the tradition of Latin American decolonial critical thought, grounded in the Modernity/Coloniality research program. In this analysis, we acknowledge the contextual nature of knowledge production and the importance of centering Global South epistemologies. Our theoretical framework deliberately integrates critiques of development with decolonial theory, seeking to address both the structural and epistemic dimensions of contemporary development challenges.

In this context, we seek possibilities for alternative modes of existence that advance towards more equitable societies. We therefore propose a critical examination of the specious alternatives offered by 'sustainable development' by foregrounding the relationship between Universal Basic Income and Buen Vivir. We maintain that UBI as a policy and Buen Vivir as a cosmovision possess significant potential as alternatives for resource redistribution within society and could facilitate profound transformations in social organisation and human-nature relations to promote socio-environmental justice.

Our analysis is directed especially toward scholars of critical development studies and social policy makers in Latin America; however, the proposal has the potential for broader application. We conducted a non-systematic literature review to critically explore the main debates on development from the perspectives of post-development and decoloniality. The selection of texts was based on criteria of theoretical relevance, their influence on the Latin American academic debate, and their capacity to offer alternatives to the hegemonic development paradigm. We used academic databases (Scopus, Google Scholar, and RedALyC), in addition to bibliographies cited in key works from both approaches.

The subsequent section presents a critical examination of development through two significant contemporary theoretical frameworks: post-development and decoloniality. We then proceed to elucidate the conception of Buen Vivir (section 3) and Universal Basic Income (section 4) to facilitate the comparative analysis. Finally, section 5 presents what aims to be the principal contribution of this work

by analysing how both concepts share (or diverge in) purposes for the construction of socio-environmental justice.

A Critical Look at Development: Post-Development and the Decolonial Turn

The theoretical schools of Latin American Dependency and decolonial thought have critically examined North-South relations to illuminate how dependencies have been established and perpetuated. Dependency theorists have primarily focused on analysing the economic and structural subordination that has historically characterised these relations (Bambirra, 1974; Marini, 1973; dos Santos, 1970), whilst decolonial scholars have concentrated on interrogating epistemological, ontological, cultural and affective dependencies through conceptual frameworks such as the coloniality of knowledge, being, feeling and power (Escobar, 1998; Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2008).

Both intellectual traditions emerged as critical responses to extractivist economic policies directed predominantly towards the Global South (Svampa, 2012). These perspectives conceptualise development discourse as a project conceived within Western theoretical frameworks—both economic and cultural—fundamentally embedded in capitalist and imperial logics:

"It is cultural in two distinct senses: firstly, it emerges from the particular historical experience of European modernity; and secondly, it subordinates other cultures and knowledge systems, which it seeks to transform according to Western principles. Development privileges economic growth, the exploitation of natural resources, market logic and the pursuit of material and individual satisfaction above any other goal." (Escobar, 2011, p. 307).

The notion of development as progression towards 'civilisation' is intrinsic to the modern-colonial world system (Grosfoguel, 2016), wherein history is conceptualised as a linear trajectory of progress with a definitive beginning, middle and end—a continuous path along which advancement is deemed imperative. However, contrary to the rhetoric of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) regarding 'leaving no one behind', contemporary conditions demonstrate how social welfare remains the preserve of the Global North, both in economic terms and in reducing social inequalities, often at the expense of nations in the Global South (Brand, 2021).

It is important to highlight that in this article we draw on both decolonial and post-development authors, as we believe they can complement each other. We adopt an intersectional perspective that allows us to rethink Universal Basic Income not

only as an economic and social policy, but as part of a broader civilizational transformation rooted in alternative visions, such as Buen Vivir.

Post-development is a critical school of thought that challenges the very notion of 'development,' viewing it as a Western narrative imposed on other ways of life, knowledge, and social organization. The main authors of post-development include Maristella Svampa (2012), Raúl Zibechi (2010), Eduardo Gudynas (2011), and Gustavo Esteva (2011).

This critique aims to open pathways toward alternatives to development that are not based on economic growth, modernization, or linear technical progress. Decoloniality shares this critique but goes a step further by focusing specifically on the problem of knowledge and the colonality of knowledge. Its question is not limited to: What model of society do we desire? — it also asks: From what epistemic perspective are we imagining that society?

We must point out that there is a difference between decolonization and decoloniality. Decolonization, in its most common sense, refers to the political and historical processes through which colonized peoples regained their formal sovereignty from colonial powers. It involves state and territorial emancipation, which mainly characterized the 20th century.

In contrast, decoloniality goes beyond the formal act of independence. It is an epistemic and civilizational critique that questions the persistence of colonial logics in culture, knowledge, the economy, and social relations even after formal decolonization, such as the imposition of models of development, education, or well-being from Eurocentric frameworks, even when a country is politically independent. The main authors of decoloniality include Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Catherine Walsh, María Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Enrique Dussel, and Arturo Escobar.

The Imperial Mode of Living and Contemporary Development Challenges

Current geopolitical dynamics evidence the persistence of a development model predicated upon natural resource exploitation, resulting in intensified conflicts and wars that, whilst ostensibly conducted for political reasons, manifest evident geopolitical interests in the contestation over natural resources.

This contestation is exemplified by the increasing numbers of people compelled to flee their countries of origin due to resource scarcity or climate change; indeed, the very terminology of 'environmental refugees' remains contested and presents significant challenges for international environmental law (Borràs Pentinat, 2006).

Moreover, as Brand (2021) reflects, behind purportedly 'ethnic' conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo lies the Global North's insatiable demand for minerals such as coltan, essential for the production of mobile telephones and laptops. Similarly, water conflicts exacerbated by climate change-induced drought reflect the consequences of decades of natural resource exploitation by Northern agro-industrial corporations, which have systematically undermined indigenous agricultural practices to serve the interests of local and transnational elites.

Such was the case of *La Oroya Community v. Peru*, decided by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2024, which represents a significant milestone in recognizing the right to a healthy environment as a fundamental human right. For years, residents of La Oroya, an Andean city in Peru, were exposed to alarming levels of heavy metal contamination from a metallurgical complex that operated with minimal environmental oversight. The Court determined that the Peruvian state had violated fundamental rights—including the right to life with dignity, personal integrity, and access to environmental information—by failing to implement adequate protective measures for the population. The ruling mandates that the state provide medical care, remediate the contaminated environment, sanction those responsible, and establish safeguards to prevent future occurrences. This precedent strengthens environmental protection and community rights in the face of industrial exploitation throughout Latin America (Daroncho and Alves, 2024). Consequently, the fundamental questions regarding 'sustainable' development must be: Development for whom? What form of sustainability? For which societies?

We contend that the 'life project of Modernity' (Dussel, 2016) is predicated upon environmental degradation for human survival. Brand argues that the discourse of modernity is founded upon an 'imperial mode of living' (Brand, 2021), wherein parameters for a 'good life' are established according to Western and materialist conceptions, marketed as an aspirational lifestyle to be emulated by Global South nations. It is crucial to recognise that the counterpart—the coloniality of this imperial mode of living—is precisely the violence concealed within the conditions of production that sustain these environmentally and socially costly lifestyles.

Both governmental and corporate discourses reveal a metamorphosis of traditional development paradigms into notions of 'sustainable development', frequently predicated upon 'greenwashing'³ —a strategy deployed to assert the

³ Alejos (2013) notes that the concept of greenwashing was introduced in the 1980s by ecologist Jay Westerveld and subsequently incorporated into the Oxford English Dictionary, where it is defined as 'the dissemination of false information by an

sustainability of commodities whilst obscuring fundamentally unsustainable production processes (Boote, 2009; Brand, 2021). In numerous instances, these practices contravene human rights frameworks (Abate, 2023).

It is imperative to emphasise that the concept of sustainable development is structurally embedded within green capitalism, functioning as a business model for global elites (Brand, 2021). This model exists to perpetuate and preserve the current mode of production and, consequently, the continuity of the imperial mode of living, which necessitates exclusivity to the Global North to remain viable, as the North must "defend a welfare generated at the expense of others" (Brand, 2021, p.45). The imperial mode of living is conceptualised as:

"The ways in which the norms of production and consumption forged in the global North—but extended since the mid-20th century to the rest of the world—are sustained at the cost of violence, ecological destruction and human suffering, especially—though not exclusively—in the global South. Or, more concretely, they analyse how the imperial mode of living of the global North systematically conceals the conditions of production—from the extraction of natural resources to the working conditions of labourers—that allow it to externalise the negative impacts of capital operations to peripheral regions of the world" (Brand and Wissen, 2021, p.9).

Beyond Development: Towards Alternative Paradigms

Significantly, this imperial mode of living is extending to the Global South. An analysis of international relations reveals the emergent role of 'new economic powers'. These powers advocate for green and sustainable development both in multilateral forums and bilateral relations (United Nations Conferences on Climate Change [COP], Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]). China, exemplifying these new economic powers, supported the establishment of the climate loss and damage fund for developing countries at COP 28⁴.

organisation in order to appear environmentally responsible'. Furthermore, Greenpeace characterises this phenomenon as 'the practice of deceiving consumers into believing that a company's products and goals are environmentally sustainable'. This conceptualisation illuminates the strategic corporate manipulation of environmental discourse to obscure unsustainable practices whilst projecting an image of ecological responsibility.

⁴ Even though China ranks among the principal emitters of greenhouse gases, it strategically positions itself behind the shield of historical responsibilities for greenhouse gas emissions to maintain status as a creditor rather than a debtor of the climate fund (de Brito Vasconcelos, 2024). This stance reflects the complex geopolitics of climate justice, wherein emerging powers navigate between their contemporary environmental impact and the historical ecological debt accumulated by established industrial nations.

Nevertheless, through investment in megaprojects across Latin America and the African continent, one can discern that praxis continues to replicate capitalist patterns of production. Indeed, Giraudo (2020) demonstrates how China reproduces the centre-periphery dynamics proposed by dependency theorists through its relationship with South America predicated upon soya production. That is, China exports manufactured products to the region whilst importing raw materials related to soya. Similar dynamics can be observed regarding the roles of Russia, Iran and other countries not traditionally categorised within the economic centre (Toro, 2023).

In this context, conventional development paradigms persist as the foundation of modernity for emerging powers, with extractivism constituting the primary method of capital accumulation in Latin America—a model that engenders persistent conflicts throughout the continent (see monograph by Dupuits and Mancilla García, 2016; Dayot, 2023).

According to Spyer Dulci (2021), development has become an organising and guiding principle of social life. This principle was established as the cornerstone of contemporary societies since the 1970s, when President Harry Truman's discourse introduced the binary categorisation of 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries.

Concurrently, during the 1990s, alongside the advancement of neoliberalism and globalisation, the school of 'post-development' emerged, grounded in post-structuralism, feminist theories and post-colonial thought. This intellectual tradition established dialogues with social movements, addressing the social exclusion inherent in the development project from a 'suleada' perspective⁵. They were influenced by Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda and Ivan Illich; contemporary proponents of this school include Alberto Acosta, Gustavo Esteva, Eduardo Gudynas, Edgardo Lander, Enrique Leff and Maristella Svampa, amongst others.

As an exemplification of this perspective, which complements the decolonial approach, we can conceptualise the dynamics of socio-environmental struggles as an eco-territorial turn:

⁵ According to Priscila Ribeiro Dorella and Tereza M. Spyer Dulci (2022), the expression 'sulear' was employed by Paulo Freire in 'Pedagogia da Esperança' and symbolises a paradigmatic shift in relation to the word 'nortear' (to guide by the North) (Freire, 2015). By utilising the term 'Sulear', they endeavour to prioritise the epistemologies, ontologies and local knowledge systems of the epistemological South, thereby challenging the hegemonic Northern-centric frameworks of knowledge production and validation.

"(...) the dynamics of socio-environmental struggles in Latin America have been laying the foundation for what we can call the eco-territorial turn, that is, the emergence of a common language that accounts for the innovative intersection between the indigenous-community matrix, defence of territory and environmentalist discourse (...) Common goods, food sovereignty, environmental justice and good living are some of the topics that express this productive intersection between different matrices." (Svampa, 2012, p. 7-8).

Consequently, we understand post-development as complementary to the decolonial movement (Escobar, 2011), functioning as a strategy whose primary objective is the deconstruction of conventional development paradigms. However, beyond this deconstruction, a rupture with the foundational pillars of traditional development is also proposed. For this reason, the decolonial turn is crucial not only to dismantle the concept of development but also to interrogate modernity itself, including notions of progress and rationality—ideas that constitute the core of modernity and have established the foundations for the reproduction of neo-extractivism and the production of the current climate crisis (Dulci, 2021).

Following Eduardo Gudynas (2011), we distinguish between 'alternative developments' and 'alternatives to development'. Alternative developments propose to mitigate effects through remedial options whilst accepting the premises of growth and appropriation of nature, provided that effects can be 'compensated'—as exemplified by sustainable development discourses promulgated by governmental organisations. Conversely, alternatives to development envision fundamentally different ontological and epistemological frameworks, rejecting the necessity for infinite growth and challenging the anthropocentric separation of humans from nature.

In this context, Andean-Amazonian initiatives offer significant contributions to interrogating conceptions of the common good, well-being, progress and development. This perspective invites us to consider what Buen Vivir might signify within urban environments (Lalander and Cuestas-Caza, 2018).

Buen Vivir: An Alternative to the Hegemonic Concept of Wellbeing

Buen Vivir has emerged as a concept of increasing significance within development studies literature, particularly following its institutional incorporation in Bolivia and Ecuador (Lalander, 2016; Lalander and Cuestas-Caza, 2018). In this analysis, we conceptualise Buen Vivir as an indigenous Andean critical ontology that challenges conventional development paradigms predicated upon unlimited growth, incessant material accumulation, and the commodification of nature, whilst disregarding the finite nature of ecological resources (Friggeri, 2017).

Additionally, we recognize that the concept of Buen Vivir has been interpreted and developed by scholars and social movements who have adapted and expanded these original ideas. This has given rise to broader theoretical frameworks that seek to offer alternatives to dominant development models. This academic effort has successfully established Buen Vivir as a political and social paradigm that influences debates on sustainability, environmental justice, and public policy in Latin America (Beling et al., 2021).

Buen Vivir or the 'good ways of living' manifests under various nomenclatures across indigenous communities: the Aymaras refer to 'Suma Qamaña', the Quichuas to 'Sumak Kawsay', and the Guaranis to 'Ñandereko'. For these communities, rather than merely a theoretical construct, it constitutes a quotidian praxis that interrogates Eurocentric conceptions of wellbeing, grounded in contestations against the coloniality of power (Acosta, 2016).

Buen Vivir should not be viewed solely as an Indigenous philosophy or worldview, but also as a set of concrete social and political practices implemented in various communities and movements across Latin America. Astudillo (2020) highlights how these practices—present in Shuar, Kichwa, and Manteña communities—include collective resource management, community-based decision-making, and solidarity, offering an alternative way of relating to nature and promoting collective well-being. Similarly, Lang (2019) emphasizes that Buen Vivir involves life strategies and forms of social organization that seek ecological balance and social justice, illustrating how these Indigenous worldviews are embodied in everyday life. In this way, Buen Vivir serves as both a theoretical and practical framework for rethinking and building alternatives to conventional development in the region.

For the purposes of this study, we adopt Lalander and Cuestas-Caza's definition of Buen Vivir:

"Sumak Kawsay represents the ideal of the indigenous social project, understood as an epistemic proposal based on Andean-Amazonian institutions and ways of life. Sumak is translated, for example, as: full, beautiful, splendid, excellent; and Kawsay, as: life, existence, even as culture (Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, 2007), because for ancestral Amazonian and Andean peoples, life is culture and culture is life. In this sense, it is important to understand Sumak Kawsay as a concept that emerges and exists in a particular context and is under construction, oscillating between a re-appropriation by indigenous peoples (and the Indigenous Movement), and a re-adaptation by academia. " (Lalander and Cuestas-Caza, 2018, p.3).

According to Lalander and Cuestas-Caza (2018), scholarly consensus identifies three distinct articulations of Buen Vivir: (1) post-developmental-ecologist, (2) indigenous-culturalist, and (3) eco-socialist statist. Within the post-developmental-ecologist current, Buen Vivir resonates with propositions such as socio-environmental justice, degrowth theory, and transition movements. This articulation has achieved the most extensive international dissemination; however, it diverges from the indigenous-culturalist version, which places greater emphasis on cosmological dimensions, ancestral spirits, and Amazonian and Andean ontologies.

Conversely, the eco-socialist statist articulation positions the state as the principal agent for resource redistribution in pursuit of socio-environmental justice. Both the eco-socialist vision and Buen Vivir share a critique of capitalist structures and present themselves as alternatives to capitalism and contemporary ecological crises. Consequently, despite their differences, these propositions engage in a productive dialogue that interrogates the foundational values of contemporary societies and explores possibilities for transformation (Le Quang and Vercoutère, 2013).

It is imperative to emphasise that Buen Vivir transcends a folkloric approach to nature; rather, it constitutes a way of life that facilitates conceptualisation of a 'Transmodernity'—understood as the explicit transcendence of 'Postmodernity'—representing a novel life project wherein diverse modes of living well can coexist in a more humanistic and balanced manner, proposing the recuperation of communitarian values from indigenous cosmovisions (Dussel, 2016).

This proposition has garnered significant interest primarily because it represents a potential alternative to the development vision embedded within the modernity/coloniality project that currently structures our economic system (Escobar, 2003; Lander, 2000). Within this system, we encounter the 'life project of Modernity' (Dussel, 2016) that sustains itself through environmental degradation for human survival. In contrast, various indigenous cultures across Latin America or Abya Yala embody alternative modes of existence that facilitate harmonious coexistence with nature, wherein resource utilisation occurs in a manner that minimally impacts the environment and respects its regenerative capacity (Waldmüller, 2014).

We position Buen Vivir as a crucial conceptual framework for the collective construction of alternative modes of existence that transcend notions of progress, productivist paradigms, and linear evolution. Rather, this more nuanced perspective facilitates consideration of potential transitions towards authentic transformation (Acosta, 2016).

To operationalise the concept of Buen Vivir, the Objectives of Buen Vivir (OBV) are currently being developed globally (Capitán et al., 2019) as an alternative proposition to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

"The OBVs on a global scale, as general objectives, would be three: biocentric sustainability, which would reflect harmony with all beings in nature; social equity, which would embody harmony with all human beings; and personal satisfaction, which would manifest harmony with oneself" (Capitán et al., 2019, p.23).

It is significant to note that these objectives are interrelated, with comprehensive achievement being unfeasible without simultaneous fulfilment of all three. However, a hierarchical relationship exists amongst these objectives, wherein biocentric sustainability constrains the means to achieve social equity, and social equity constrains the means for personal satisfaction. The principal critique of the SDGs relates to the perspective articulated in the preceding section—namely, that whilst they aspire to economic, social, and environmental sustainability, they do so within the paradigmatic constraints of the modern-colonial system. Consequently, the SDGs fail to interrogate the modern development model, which we identify as the root cause of contemporary maldevelopment (Capitán et al., 2019, p.23).

The most visible practical manifestations of Buen Vivir principles are their incorporation within the Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, where the decolonisation of the state entailed restructuring its relationship with nature. Nature becomes a subject of rights through a biocentric vision of the planet, proposing recognition of the plurinationality and interculturality of the peoples in both countries (Walsh, 2008).

Buen Vivir represents part of Ecuador's protracted search for alternatives, championed by popular movements, predominantly indigenous. The Constitution formalises Buen Vivir; however, this quest for alternatives predates Rafael Correa's presidency (Gudynas and Acosta, 2011). This constituent process, consolidated in 2007 and 2008, involved heterogeneous participation aimed at profound transformations in society, economy, and human-nature relations.

In Ecuador's 2008 Constitution, this concept is articulated as the 'rights of Buen Vivir', encompassing diverse rights (including food security, environmental integrity, water access, communication, education, housing, healthcare, and energy). For instance, Article 14 "recognises the right of the population to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that guarantees sustainability and Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay" (Gudynas and Acosta, 2011, p.74).

In Bolivia, discourse surrounding Buen Vivir reflects more recent and contested debates, as Suma Qamaña is a relatively recent expression, considered by some scholars as a construct developed by Aymara intellectuals rather than vernacular terminology within local communities. It can therefore be understood as a concept in evolution. In Bolivia's 2009 Constitution:

"(...) insists that to achieve 'living well in its multiple dimensions', the economic organisation must address purposes such as the generation of social product, fair redistribution of wealth, industrialisation of natural resources, and so forth (Article 313)" (Gudynas and Acosta, 2011, p.76).

We recognize that there are important critiques regarding the institutionalization of Buen Vivir, as pointed out by Churuchumbi (2014) and Rivera Cusicanqui (2008). Churuchumbi highlights how Buen Vivir, incorporated into the Ecuadorian Constitution, is presented as a set of rights within a broader legal framework, without a clear articulation with other rights such as the right to development, which creates ambiguities and limits its practical application. Similarly, Cusicanqui warns of the risk that Buen Vivir, once incorporated into state institutions, can become just another mechanism of government apparatus, moving away from the original indigenous worldview and turning into a tool of control or superficial management.

Thus, while we acknowledge the critiques and risks, we advocate for a critical dialogue that allows the principles of Buen Vivir to serve as a foundation for transforming public policies from below, strengthening ancestral knowledge and resisting the imposition of hegemonic development models.

Consequently, Buen Vivir represents a concept under construction, whose postulates may illuminate solutions to contemporary challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, and structural inequalities. According to Dussel, transmodernity proposes salvaging the most valuable aspects of Modernity and integrating them with the positive elements of cultural heritage, representing a critical positioning that aspires for humanity to transition towards historical epochs constructed upon new realities. It further seeks to transcend the limitations of modern and postmodern projects, identifying effective responses to planetary challenges through the epistemologies of subaltern peoples (Rojas, 2019).

Universal Basic Income: An Alternative to Inequality?

Within the context of 'transmodernity', we aim to investigate the complementarity between Universal Basic Income (UBI) and Buen Vivir. Both

(re)gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rosero Morán et al., 2021; Mäntyneva and Hiilamo, 2024), which demonstrated how our imperial mode of living (Brand, 2021) precipitates environmental disequilibria and how governments, predominantly, were capable of implementing emergency cash transfers and services across low, middle, and high-income countries.

In this (post)pandemic conjuncture, diverse questions emerged regarding our modes of existence and potential transformations thereof. Additionally, interrogations arise concerning the nature of contemporary welfare states, the public policies implemented, the trajectory of social policies, the extant model of social protection, and the wellbeing horizon towards which we aspire (Higuera Garavito, 2022; Goodwin, 2022; Del Pino Matute and Cruz-Martínez, 2021).

It is important to note that unlike Buen Vivir, which represents a comprehensive worldview with inherent values, UBI is primarily a policy mechanism (a cash transfer policy) that can be advocated from diverse ideological positions. Buen Vivir originates in indigenous cosmovisions, subsequently becoming a demand of social movements before permeating academic and political spheres. Universal Basic Income's development has involved ongoing dialogue between academic theory, political movements, and policy experimentation. Some support UBI from libertarian perspectives focused on individual freedom and government simplification, others from socialist perspectives centered on redistribution, poverty reduction or worker empowerment, conservatives highlight family stability and entrepreneurship, and still others from ecological perspectives are concerned with sustainable lifestyles. Our analysis focuses specifically on how UBI might be implemented in ways that align with and support Buen Vivir principles, rather than suggesting these values are inherent to UBI itself or universally accepted among all the range of UBI advocates.

Nevertheless, both proposals have achieved partial materialisation. Buen Vivir has been incorporated into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, transitioning from abstract discourse to practical implementation (as previously mentioned). Similarly, Universal Basic Income manifests in public policy experiments conducted in countries including Finland, Canada, Kenya, and Iran (Bollain et al., 2024). The empirical outcomes are heterogeneous, with evidence of positive effects on education, health, and employment (Gibson, Hearty and Craig, 2020; Schjoedt et al., 2015), albeit with uncertainties regarding long-term impacts on inequality, wellbeing, and macroeconomic outcomes (Conesa, Li and Li, 2023).

Prior to examining potential complementarities with Buen Vivir, it is imperative to delineate the concept of UBI and differentiate it from related constructs such as

minimum income. In this analysis, we adopt Van Parijs's conceptualisation of Universal Basic Income:

"(...) an income paid by the government to each full member of society, even if they do not want to work in a paid manner, without taking into consideration whether they are rich or poor or, in other words, regardless of their other possible sources of income and regardless of who they live with" (Réy Perez, 2020 apud Van Parijs, 1996, p. 56).

This definition highlights UBI's core characteristics as a policy tool, without attributing specific ideological values to it. As Lawhon and McCreary (2020) argue in their work 'Making UBI Radical,' UBI can be understood as a tool that can support various activities and objectives, including non-capitalist ones, depending on how it is implemented and the broader social context in which it operates.

Conversely, minimum income typically constitutes a monetary transfer of social assistance targeted at vulnerable populations, entailing eligibility testing requirements (targeting mechanisms) to identify beneficiaries (Cruz-Martínez, 2019).

To differentiate minimum income from universal basic income, we must analyse their respective characteristics. UBI's primary characteristic is universality; consequently, income level, wealth, household composition, and similar factors do not function as eligibility criteria for beneficiary inclusion.

The receiving unit of UBI is the individual, whereas in numerous contemporary social policies, the receiving unit—or at minimum the eligibility criteria—derives from the family unit or household. Welfare state institutions are predicated upon familialisation, which refers to the obligation that income is received collectively as a family⁶. This characteristic of individuality in UBI may illuminate solutions to contemporary issues related to gender-based violence, as numerous women remain economically dependent on abusive partners and lack the financial autonomy to exit such relationships⁷ (Réy Perez, 2020).

⁶ It is important not to conflate this phenomenon with the social policy concept of welfare familiarisation. This latter term refers to the degree of family dependence in alleviating social risks. A social policy that defamiliarises is one that diminishes the family's role in guaranteeing wellbeing, transferring this responsibility to other institutions such as the state or the market (Martínez-Franzoni, 2008).

⁷ Badillo (2019) highlights the ambivalent externalities of Mexican and Brazilian monetary transfers being directed to women. On one hand, this approach enhances women's bargaining power within the family unit, augmenting their personal autonomy; on the other hand, it simultaneously reinforces traditional gender roles related to care and

UBI's third characteristic is unconditionality. This represents a crucial debate in advancing towards less paternalistic social policies that exercise 'guardianship' over the impoverished. In current minimum income schemes, conditions are imposed both for families to apply and to maintain participation in governmental programmes. Consequently, the phenomenon known as 'non-take-up' occurs—the proportion of eligible individuals who do not apply for benefits despite meeting eligibility requirements. The aetiology of this phenomenon encompasses personal circumstances, information deficits, and subsidy design features (Arcarons, Raventós and Torrens, 2023). For instance, a recent study in Spain identified that 7 out of 10 individuals eligible for the Minimum Vital Income residing in vulnerable areas experienced primary non-take-up of the benefit. That is, approximately 70 percent of the eligible population has not applied for the benefit in the country's most vulnerable territories (EAPN, 2024).

Furthermore, UBI is conceptualised as a periodic subsidy, although consensus regarding its periodicity (e.g., monthly or annual) remains elusive. Universal basic income does not constitute remuneration in kind but rather income in cash. One objective of this payment modality is to disrupt the intimate relationship between labour and income (Réy Perez, 2020). This false analogy completely disregards unpaid labour, predominantly performed by women—care work that contributes significant wealth to national economies, without which society and economic systems cannot function adequately (Federici, 2013).

The origins of universal basic income can be situated in the 1980s, emerging from the work of Philippe Van Parijs, although embryonic conceptions of universal basic income can be identified in the works of Thomas More and Johannes Ludovicus Vives. The contemporary history of Universal Basic Income specifically emerges from the proposition advanced by the Charles Fourier Collective, comprising university academics and researchers: Paul-Marie Boulanger, Philippe Defeyt, Luc Monees, and Philippe Van Parijs. This proposition was presented in a post-war context (World War II), characterised by sustained and enduring economic growth. This trajectory diverged with the oil crisis of the 1980s and the concomitant rise in European unemployment rates (Réy Perez, 2020; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017).

The UBI libertarian proposition aimed to simplify the complex bureaucratic apparatus currently maintaining minimum income schemes and the associated administrative costs. To achieve this, they proposed the elimination of unemployment subsidies, pensions, social assistance, minimum wages,

wellbeing provision, as women bear the responsibility for fulfilling the conditionalities attached to these transfers.

emergency transfers to companies in crisis, and student scholarships. Instead, the state would provide a monthly sum sufficient to meet each citizen's basic needs. Modifications would apply solely to the amount based on age and, where applicable, disability status, all financed through progressive income taxation⁸ (Réy Perez, 2020).

In many contemporary societies, particularly those integrated into global capitalism, money functions as a primary medium through which individuals access various forms of life, yet these modes of existence bear the burden of manifold deprivations. For many communities, especially in urban and market-integrated contexts, the right to determine one's life trajectory remains closely linked to financial resources, with working class populations often denied the autonomy to determine their *Planes de vida*^{9,10}. A UBI implementation could potentially facilitate greater freedom for individuals operating within monetized economies to select their mode of existence. However, we recognize that UBI alone, without being shaped by ecological consciousness and respect for diverse economic systems, could simply replicate existing paradigms. This concern has been well-articulated by several scholars, including Pinto (2020) who argues that UBI must be embedded within broader ecological transitions, Howard, Pinto and Schachtschneider (2023) who explore the potential ecological impacts of basic income, and Bohnenberger (2020) who examines UBI's relationship to sustainable welfare.

⁸ Although the proposal was a finalist among the five best proposals in the King Baudouin Foundation's call on 'The Future of Work' in Belgium in 1984, it was not implemented in European countries. This period marked the genesis of the BIEN Network (Basic Income European Network); the inaugural congress was organized in 1986 in Louvain-la-Neuve, and due to its extensive international reach, the organization changed its name to Basic Income Earth Network at the 2004 congress held in Barcelona. The meetings are held annually, and in 2024 the first Latin American Universal Basic Income Congress took place in Costa Rica. In August 2025, the second Latin American Universal Basic Income Congress will be held in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

⁹ A *plan de vida* (life plan) refers to an individual's life path—encompassing the choices and opportunities available for how they wish to live. It includes decisions about education, career, family, lifestyle, and personal goals. When someone cannot choose their *plan de vida*, it indicates they lack the freedom or resources to shape their future and make meaningful life decisions, often due to economic or social constraints. A *plan de vida* also carries cultural connotations beyond individual choice—it can encompass community-oriented life paths and collective well-being, especially in Indigenous and rural contexts where individual plans are often intertwined with community development and cultural preservation.

¹⁰ We recognize that this characterization doesn't apply universally—several communities, particularly indigenous ones, maintain economic systems where reciprocity, communal ownership, and non-monetary exchange remain central.

A Universal Basic Income informed by the principles of Buen Vivir acknowledges the necessity for each individual to pursue their chosen Plan de vida, albeit from a collective and environmental perspective. Whilst this discussion may appear abstract, it is imperative to highlight the practical convergences between these approaches that demonstrate their inherent potentialities. Following Lawhorn and McCreary (2023), UBI is a form of “modest statecraft” that redistributes economic resources without increasing the biopolitical power of the state to decide who is worthy of social assistance and what citizens need. This approach echoes with decolonial critiques of paternalistic social policy models that presume to know what individuals need, and with conditional cash transfer programs that reproduce colonial power dynamics with the imposition of conditions (behavioral requirements). In contrast, the unconditionality of UBI respects the dignity and autonomy of individuals to determine and prioritize their needs.

When considering transitions towards less extractive modes of existence, the first pillar requiring interrogation is the positioning of work as the cardinal virtue of contemporary society (Lowrey, 2018). Currently, work, coupled with the discourse of infinite economic growth, imposes upon our lives the imperative to be productive at all costs, relegating the ecological damage caused by unbridled growth and production, as well as psychological harm to human wellbeing, to the status of 'negative externalities'. The impact on mental health across the Latin American region is particularly significant, disproportionately affecting workers in the informal sector (Bernardino and Andrade, 2015). These effects are exacerbated by precarious employment conditions, economic insecurity, and inadequate social protection (Juárez-García, 2018). Universal Basic Income potentially mitigates these deleterious effects on workers' mental health by providing enhanced economic security and establishing a universal foundation of social protection.

It is crucial to emphasize that UBI should not be misconstrued as a panacea that would automatically resolve Latin America's deeply segmented social protection systems, where access to quality services varies dramatically based on social group membership (Arza et al., 2022). The region's stratified welfare architecture—where formal sector workers access higher-quality contributory protections while others receive only residual assistance—requires comprehensive reform beyond cash transfers alone (Cruz-Martínez, 2019). UBI would complement rather than replace the necessary expansion of universal, high-quality public services in healthcare, education, childcare, and long-term care, which remain essential components of a truly inclusive social protection system (Cruz-Martínez, Vargas Faulbaum and Velasco, 2024).

While Buen Vivir inherently recognizes the earth as common heritage and interrogates the current distributive order, UBI as a policy can be implemented in ways that either support or undermine this recognition. Our proposal specifically advocates for a UBI implementation that aligns with Buen Vivir's principles of environmental stewardship and just distribution. Land represents a neuralgic issue; understanding that the contemporary system is predicated upon a historical division between proprietors and tenants illuminates the mechanisms of intergenerational poverty transmission. Various countries have implemented agrarian reforms, although in Latin America such transformations remain distant, despite the resilient struggles of social movements.

Interrogating the distributive system is crucial for envisioning future transitions. We observe an increasing movement of young people interested in agriculture and families seeking to integrate rural practices into urban environments through small-scale horticulture¹¹ (Krenak, 2019). The pandemic has, according to extant literature, catalysed these ruralisation processes, precipitating net migrations towards rural areas (Lavado and Agreda, 2023). From our proposed decolonial perspective, a UBI implementation could be designed to support collective objectives, including communality and environmental stewardship. However, we acknowledge that this represents just one possible approach to UBI, and many UBI advocates would prioritize different objectives such as individual freedom, economic efficiency, or poverty reduction without necessarily emphasizing environmental or communal values.

Towards Socio-Environmental Justice: Universal Basic Income and Buen Vivir

The implementation of UBI through a Buen Vivir lens could facilitate the recuperation of redistributive mechanisms. Global wealth continues to be monopolised by the wealthiest 1%, whilst more than 700 million people are deprived of economic resources and the autonomy to determine their life trajectories (World Bank, 2025). UBI's transformative potential will necessarily

¹¹ "In different places, people are fighting to give this planet a chance through agroecology and permaculture. This micropolitics is spreading and will take the place of disillusionment with macropolitics. The agents of micropolitics are people who plant gardens in their backyards, who break open sidewalks to let whatever wants to grow emerge. They believe it is possible to remove the concrete tomb of the metropolises (...) Over time, people concentrated in metropolises and the planet became a forest of poles. But now, from within the concrete, this utopia emerges of transforming the urban cemetery into life. Agroforestry and permaculture show forest peoples that there are people in cities making new alliances possible, without that idea of countryside on one side and city on the other" (Krenak, 2020:12)

depend upon its quantum and the potential replacement rate of the transfer (that is, its proximity to average wages or poverty thresholds), as well as the broader social and political context in which it is implemented.

Furthermore, when informed by Buen Vivir principles, a UBI implementation could support conceptions of wellbeing that transcend consumerist notions of 'living better', instead emphasizing physical and emotional wellbeing in communion with nature. This represents the fundamental objective of Buen Vivir—life in plenitude, encompassing internal harmony (material and spiritual), communal harmony, and harmony with nature. UBI, by potentially decoupling subsistence from the imperative to sell labor power, could provide individuals with greater autonomy to determine their temporal allocation and life projects.

Proposing a UBI implementation informed by Buen Vivir principles transcends conventional approaches to social policy within capitalist frameworks, which often deploy social policies primarily to sustain growth. Instead, it offers a potential pathway toward alternative social and environmental arrangements. A UBI implementation could potentially facilitate greater freedom for individuals operating within monetized economies to select their mode of existence.

We emphasise that the primary objective of integrating these propositions is to promote socio-environmental justice, to propose new roles for civil society, and to recuperate collective spaces for the effective exercise of citizenship. This entails promoting alternative modes of existence wherein solidarity economies, self-managed communities, and cultural diversities can flourish through an income that is unconditional rather than contingent, universal rather than targeted, permanent rather than temporary, and which offers justice and dignity within a world less burdened by ecological crises and social inequalities.

Table 1 presents the common objectives of UBI and Buen Vivir. In summary, these potential alignments and differences illuminate how Buen Vivir principles might potentially inform UBI policies that seek to transform our societies towards more equitable and sustainable models, albeit originating from distinct approaches and foundations.

Table 1: Comparing a Policy Mechanism (UBI) and a Comprehensive Worldview (Buen Vivir)

Potential Alignments	Differences
Potential for Supporting Individual Autonomy: Buen Vivir inherently emphasizes individual autonomy within a communal context. While UBI as a policy	Nature of the Concept: UBI is fundamentally a policy proposal—a specific mechanism for income distribution that can be implemented

<p>contains no inherent values regarding autonomy, specific implementations could be designed to provide individuals with financial resources that may reduce economic pressures and expand decision-making capacity, potentially supporting individuals' ability to make choices according to their values.</p>	<p>within various ideological frameworks. In contrast, Buen Vivir represents a comprehensive cosmovision that encompasses all aspects of life, including social organization, economic relations, and human-nature interactions.</p>
<p>Relationship to Capitalist Structures: Buen Vivir offers a critique of traditional capitalism and growth-oriented development. While UBI itself is ideologically neutral as a policy mechanism, certain implementations of UBI (particularly those informed by progressive or ecological perspectives) can align with critiques of capitalism's social and environmental impacts. However, it's important to note that UBI is also advocated by those who see it as compatible with or even strengthening market capitalism through different mechanisms. The alignment between UBI and critiques of capitalism depends entirely on the specific implementation approach and underlying rationale.</p>	<p>Implementation Scope: UBI is a discrete policy intervention with specific technical parameters (amount, frequency, eligibility) that can be implemented through existing state administrative structures. Buen Vivir, as articulated in contexts like Ecuador and Bolivia, requires fundamental transformations across multiple societal dimensions—political, economic, cultural, and ecological—and challenges the very foundations of the modern state through concepts like plurinationality.</p>
<p>Potential Contributions to Sustainability Goals: Buen Vivir embodies a long-term vision oriented toward sustainability, harmony with nature, and respect for planetary boundaries. It rejects the growth-oriented development paradigm in favor of ecological balance and sufficiency. While UBI as a policy does not inherently contain sustainability principles, certain implementations could potentially reduce economic pressures that drive environmentally harmful activities by providing a financial floor that decreases dependence on extractive industries or precarious employment.</p>	<p>Relationship with the State: Buen Vivir fundamentally challenges conventional state structures and seeks to profoundly transform them, integrating principles of interculturality and plurinationality as seen in the constitutional reforms of Ecuador and Bolivia. It questions the very foundations of the modern nation-state and proposes alternative governance models that recognize indigenous autonomy and diverse ways of knowing. In contrast, UBI as a policy mechanism can be implemented within existing state frameworks and administrative systems without necessarily requiring fundamental political restructuring. While some UBI advocates may connect it to broader political transformations, the policy itself is compatible with various state structures and can be adopted</p>

	incrementally within current governance systems.
Alignment with Social and Environmental Justice Objectives: Socio-environmental justice is a central pillar of Buen Vivir. It challenges the anthropocentric separation between social and environmental concerns. UBI, while primarily conceived as an economic policy, could potentially contribute to procedural justice by enabling marginalized communities to participate more effectively in environmental decision-making processes and reducing the economic vulnerabilities that often lead to disproportionate environmental burdens. The extent of this contribution would depend on UBI's integration with other policies addressing structural inequalities and environmental governance.	Form of Statecraft: While UBI would typically be implemented by the state, it represents a distinct form of statecraft compared to conventional welfare systems. As Lawhon and McCreary (2023) argue, UBI potentially disrupts the paternalistic and disciplinary aspects of traditional social welfare by eliminating conditionalities and targeting mechanisms. However, it remains a state-administered redistribution mechanism, whereas Buen Vivir envisions alternative governance structures that may transcend or transform conventional state institutions.
	Approach towards Nature: Buen Vivir has an intrinsically biocentric approach, treating nature as a subject of rights rather than merely a resource for human use. This perspective fundamentally reorients human-nature relationships and is inseparable from the Buen Vivir framework. In contrast, UBI as a policy mechanism contains no inherent position on human-nature relationships. While UBI could be implemented alongside environmental policies or designed in ways that support ecological objectives, it does not itself carry any explicit biocentric component.

Note: This table compares a specific policy mechanism (UBI) with a comprehensive worldview (Buen Vivir). The potential alignments identified below represent ways specific implementations of UBI could complement Buen Vivir principles, rather than inherent characteristics of UBI as a policy.

The integration of Buen Vivir principles within UBI frameworks creates cross-sectoral implications, requiring fundamental shifts in policy design, environmental justice approaches, and research methodologies. For policymakers, implementing a UBI informed by Buen Vivir necessitates developing policy design principles that integrate decolonial considerations in all stages of the policy process. This involves moving beyond indicators such as GDP growth toward holistic evaluation frameworks that incorporate Indigenous well-being concepts, and ecological health measures. Policymakers must also create spaces for epistemic pluralism in policy formulation. In terms of environmental justice, a decolonial UBI could contribute significantly to post-extractive transitions by providing economic alternatives to communities dependent on extractive industries.

The principal contribution of this analysis lies in its interrogation of Universal Basic Income through decolonial perspectives—showing how this specific policy mechanism might be reconceptualised to align with epistemologies of the South whilst acknowledging its inherent limitations as a singular intervention within complex socio-environmental systems. This approach maintains a crucial epistemological distinction: UBI constitutes a delimited policy instrument with defined parameters (universality, unconditionality, individuality, and periodicity), whilst Buen Vivir represents a comprehensive cosmovision rooted in indigenous ontologies that encompasses the totality of human-nature relationships. We do not posit that UBI in isolation possesses the capacity to catalyse societal transformation towards Buen Vivir ideals, nor that it should supplant other necessary structural modifications to the coloniality of power. Rather, we propose that UBI, when conceptualised with cognisance of Buen Vivir principles and implemented concomitantly with complementary policies and communitarian initiatives, could contribute to the creation of conditions wherein alternative modes of existence—predicated upon solidarity, reciprocity, and ecological harmony—become increasingly viable. This perspective offers a potential pathway for social policy scholars and practitioners to engage substantively with Southern epistemologies whilst operating within extant institutional frameworks—thereby bridging immediate policy possibilities with longer-term transmodern visions that transcend the limitations of conventional development paradigms.

Future research should continue evaluating the potential convergence between these two concepts, and critically reaffirming the importance of decolonising social policy, particularly Universal Basic Income. To our knowledge, comprehensive research that attempts to decolonise the Universal Basic Income proposition through epistemologies of the South remains limited, with existing contributions primarily confined to the domains of Health (FeoIstúriz, Basile and Maizlish, 2023) and Education (Manathunga, 2020).

Moreover, the operationalization of Buen Vivir within UBI frameworks demands the development of pilot empirical studies that can test these theoretical propositions in real-world contexts. Such research requires the creation of indicators that can measure success beyond conventional economic metrics. Additionally, research methodologies must embrace participatory approaches that position communities as co-researchers rather than subjects of study, so that knowledge production itself reflects decolonial principles.

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